

## Multicultural Literature: A Synthesis of Literature

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Children's literature has sociopolitical implications that have an impact on students' understanding of the world and teachers' interpretations of its value as an instructional resource. Children's literature reflects the authors' political perspectives, cultural norms and biases, and views about the world. The images created affect the perspectives of students and teachers alike, and foster their critical consciousness of social issues (McNair 2003). Children's literature can also be used for aesthetic and instructional purposes (Mendoza & Reese 2001).

The purpose of the collection of articles reviewed is to examine the following questions:

- 1) What is the impact of multicultural literature on the attitudes of teachers (preservice and in-service)?
- 2) What are the attitudes of elementary students toward multicultural literature?
- 3) Which guidelines should teachers follow when selecting and using multicultural literature in reading instruction?



### Teacher Attitudes

Generally, qualitative research and ethnographic methodology have been used to examine the impact of multicultural literature on the attitudes of teachers toward sociopolitical books. McNair (2003) conducted a study with six Caucasian preservice teachers to assess their ability to recognize and analyze the presence of racism and discrimination in children's literature, as well as in school practices and policies. The

results indicated the following themes from the responses of the preservice teachers: 1) cynicism and an inability to perceive children's awareness of sociopolitical issues; 2) a reluctance to engage in individual critical reflections about racism; and 3) a reluctance to engage in critical reflections about books that they liked.

In contrast, another study conducted by Gopalakrishnan & Ulanoff (2004) to investigate the impact of multicultural literature on the attitudes of preservice and in-service teachers found that the teachers' remarks about the children's books they read affirmed their awareness of other cultures. Oral discussions and written personal narratives reflected their knowledge about the impact of race, culture,

and identity on their lives. Colby & Lyons (2004) found similar results after analyzing the response papers of 100 preservice teachers enrolled in an elementary language-arts methods course. The authors concluded that an outside stimulus might be necessary to increase the preservice teachers' awareness of what is involved in the selection and use of literature that represents diverse groups. Similarly, Nathenson-Mejia & Escamilla (2003) found positive results when the same Latino children's literature was used with 22–26 preservice teachers for three years in a field experience seminar and in their field experience classrooms. An analysis of the preservice teachers' responses was based on classroom discussions, lessons during the field experience, and their reflective summaries. Feedback from the elementary students involved in the study also supported the conclusion that the project was successful.

### Student Attitudes

A recent case study by Moller (2004) of a struggling European American fourth grade female reader provided an in-depth look at responses to multicultural literature. The study, grounded in social-constructivist theory, focused on the student's participation in a heterogeneous literature discussion group that read and discussed diverse multicultural novels. Data were collected from 27 audiotaped literature discussions, audiotaped interviews, observational field notes, student presentations, and written reports. Moller (2004) noted that there was a shift in the participation of the student from an outsider to an insider in the discussion. She challenged the understandings of the group by displaying antiracist or nonstereotypic thinking and by showing an understanding of the situations that the characters in each novel face.

Bauman, Hooten, & White (1999) conducted a year-long teacher-research project with a group of African American (61%) and European American (35%) fifth grade students to test a program they had developed to teach reading

strategies and reading motivation. Multicultural literature and three types of comprehension strategy lessons (elaborate, brief, and impromptu lessons) were presented to students. Students read self-selected multicultural literature and participated in discussion and reading study groups. The results from pre- and post-project informal surveys of the students' reading habits and interests and their oral and written comments indicated increased reading at home and school, increased valuing of reading, and a greater appreciation of literature and books.

Additional qualitative research on multicultural literature used in multilingual and multiethnic school settings is needed, along with quantitative studies of changes in students' attitudes toward multicultural literature. Larger sample sizes and experimental control groups would improve the generalizability of the results.

**Research pertaining to multicultural literature has focused on selecting and using multicultural literature for reading instruction.**

### Instruction

Research pertaining to multicultural literature has focused on selecting and using multicultural literature for reading instruction. Criteria formulated and recommended for use by educators in selecting multicultural literature that meets these objectives have been outlined by Heflin & Barksdale-

Ladd (2001). Books for African American children should: 1) feature well-developed characters in authentic and believable contexts; 2) incorporate authentic and realistic language and dialogue with dialect that is consistent with the characters featured; 3) include illustrations that portray characters and settings in realistic and authentic situations; and 4) contain accurate information. When teachers select multicultural literature, Heflin (2002) recommends that they select culturally conscious African American literature, use such methods as call-and-response interaction patterns found in the respective homes and communities, and make connections between the literature and the personal lives of students.

Quintero (2004) recommends a problem-posing critical literacy approach that uses multicultural literature. The benefits of the method are the connections made between students' personal experiences and the text that encourage critical reflection and transformative action. Culturally responsive literature discussion groups that foster character analysis through character study journals are a promising practice (Montgomery 2000). Combining students' natural storytelling abilities with quality multicultural literature is also recommended as a means for building young children's oral language skills and print literacy (Amour 2003).

### **Implications**

It is important to use multicultural children's literature when teaching all students. Preservice and in-service educators need opportunities to engage in critical thinking about the sociopolitical aspects of children's literature and to develop social critical consciousness about the issues addressed. Some of the pitfalls associated with the use of multicultural literature with the young children specified are: 1) the availability of books; 2) the time required to locate and evaluate materials; 3) beliefs in the adequacy of a single book; and 4) the use of books that are not accurate and authentic (Mendoza & Reese 2001).

There is an insufficient body of research about multicultural literature. Additional information could be gained from longitudinal research of literacy learners, multicultural literature, and interactions (Harris & Willis 2003). Future research is also needed about the impact of critical race theory and critical literacy theory on multicultural literature and reader response to multicultural literature with students at all educational levels.

### **Biography**

Doris Walker-Dalhouse is an educational consultant, researcher, and Professor of Reading at Minnesota State University - Moorhead. She earned her B.A. from Kentucky State University and achieved both her masters and Ph.D. in Reading Education from The Ohio State University. Her main areas of research are vested in the cognitive processes of writing, literature based reading, the socio-cultural aspects of literacy as well as teachers' attitudes toward diversity. In addition to her numerous publications, Doris Walker-Dalhouse has been the recipient of a myriad of awards exemplifying her continuing efforts in education. She was an active board member in the International Reading Association, was President for both the Minnesota Reading Association and Red River Reading Association, and is presently an affiliate of the National Reading Conference, as well as many other professional and academic organizations.

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